

# Solemn Processions and Terrifying Violence: Spectacle, Authority, and Citizenship during the Lachine Canal Strike of 1843

Dan Horner

Volume 38, numéro 2, printemps 2010

Encounters, Contests, and Communities: New Histories of Race and Ethnicity in the Canadian City

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/039673ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/039673ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Horner, D. (2010). Solemn Processions and Terrifying Violence: Spectacle, Authority, and Citizenship during the Lachine Canal Strike of 1843. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 38(2), 36–47. <https://doi.org/10.7202/039673ar>

Résumé de l'article

Pendant l'hiver de 1843, plus de mille ouvriers migrants irlandais embauchés pour travailler à l'agrandissement du Canal de Lachine près de Montréal font la grève pour revendiquer des salaires plus élevés. Dans les mois qui suivent, ils emploient un éventail de manifestations publiques, y compris processions nocturnes, charivaris, émeutes et parades, afin d'intimider leurs rivaux économiques et faire pression pour le soutien de la collectivité en général. Ces rassemblements ont joué un rôle central dans la façon dont les élites ont re-conceptualisé la ville, la citoyenneté et leur propre autorité à l'aube d'une période qui verra Montréal transformé par l'immigration massive et l'enracinement d'une économie capitaliste. Ils offrent également un aperçu de ce que la ville représentait pour les ouvriers grévistes en tant que moteur d'exploitation et lieu de refuge et de résistance.

# *Solemn Processions and Terrifying Violence: Spectacle, Authority, and Citizenship during the Lachine Canal Strike of 1843*

Dan Horner

*During the winter of 1843, over one thousand Irish migrant labourers hired to work on the expansion of the Lachine Canal near Montreal struck for higher wages. In the months that followed, they employed a range of public spectacles including nocturnal processions, charivaris, riots, and parades to intimidate their economic rivals and lobby for support from the broader community. These crowd events played a pivotal role in the way that elites were re-conceptualizing the city, citizenship, and their own authority at the dawn of a period that would see Montreal transformed by mass immigration and the entrenchment of a capitalist economy. They also offer some insight into what the city meant to the striking canal workers as an engine of exploitation as well as a site of refuge and resistance.*

*Pendant l'hiver de 1843, plus de mille ouvriers migrants irlandais embauchés pour travailler à l'agrandissement du Canal de Lachine près de Montréal font la grève pour revendiquer des salaires plus élevés. Dans les mois qui suivent, ils emploient un éventail de manifestations publiques, y compris processions nocturnes, charivaris, émeutes et parades, afin d'intimider leurs rivaux économiques et faire pression pour le soutien de la collectivité en général. Ces rassemblements ont joué un rôle central dans la façon dont les élites ont re-conceptualisé la ville, la citoyenneté et leur propre autorité à l'aube d'une période qui verra Montréal transformé par l'immigration massive et l'enracinement d'une économie capitaliste. Ils offrent également un aperçu de ce que la ville représentait pour les ouvriers grévistes en tant que moteur d'exploitation et lieu de refuge et de résistance.*

Early on a January morning in 1843, Henry Mason and his foremen arrived at the construction site on the banks of the Lachine Canal to find an ominous note nailed to the gate. Written in a careful hand was a blunt message: "Any person or persons who works here in the Lachine Canal under 3 shillings and 6 pence per day may have their coffin and bearer."<sup>1</sup> Mason had made the successful bid with the Board of Works to oversee the expansion of the Lachine Canal. Work had been under-way for only a few weeks when Mason's crew of Irish migrant labourers threw down their tools and walked off the job. They were demanding that their pay be raised from two shillings per day to three-and-a-half shillings, and that wages be doled out in cash at regular intervals rather than in the form of truck pay from a store owned by Norman Bethune, a

merchant associated with Mason. Additionally, they sought confirmation of their longstanding right to smoke at any time and place they wished while on the job, suggesting that they were bristling under the close surveillance of their foremen.

The strike came in two waves, the first of which occurred in January, followed by a reprise in March. These were part of a series of strikes and riots that occurred on public works projects along the eastern seaboard of the United States and along the St. Lawrence River in Canada in the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the winter of 1843, the situation at Lachine remained at the forefront of public consciousness as a result of a number of violent and spectacular public events that took place on the streets of Montreal and along the banks of the canal. Particular attention was paid to the way that the violence in question was couched in spectacle. Rival gangs of migrant labourers had begun marching by torchlight through the shantytown adjacent to the construction site in a series of demonstrations that were clearly designed to intimidate their foes. This was not the only form of public spectacle employed by the canal workers. After seeing their grievances hastily disparaged and dismissed by their employers, the migrant labourers conducted a sombre and orderly parade through the streets of Montreal in an effort to portray themselves as respectable men and prospective citizens deserving fair treatment at the hands of their employers. In both circumstances, spectacular crowd events were the most effective means available to them to defend their economic interests and protest what they felt were a number of breaches in their contract with Henry Mason.

These public acts, in both their violent and restrained manifestations, illustrate the important role that spectacle and crowd events played in the public life of mid-nineteenth-century Montreal. They provide us with a glimpse into how the city's Irish community was constituted and how they drew on customs of popular protest to make their case for better working and living conditions in North America. Moreover, they also give us an opportunity to explore attitudes towards immigration among different segments of the Montreal elite on the eve of the famine migration that witnessed thousands of Irish men, women, and children pass through the city. For as much as the social tensions associated with the mass migration from Ireland to North America in the 1840s shaped the Irish experience in Canada, it also had an important impact on the way that Montrealers defined their own culture, politics, and communities.

The response of public officials and commentators in the press varied considerably. At certain moments they expressed outrage at the violence taking place at Lachine, arguing that these occurrences justified the exclusion of the migrant labourers from the broader community, while on other occasions the canal workers found a sympathetic ear in Montreal, as editorials admonished Mason and others involved in the project for driving their employees to such extremes. In both cases, the events at Lachine prompted officials and commentators to ask difficult and divisive questions about the rights of migrant labourers in the city and about the nature of the relationship between labour and capital.

As Charles Tilly, Mary Ryan, Geoff Eley, and Susan Davis have argued, understandings of identity and citizenship were contested, relational, and, especially in the context of rapidly growing nineteenth-century cities like Montreal, shaped by public events and displays.<sup>3</sup> These ideas helped fuel a growing interest among historians of identity and popular politics in events like religious processions, public celebrations, parades, and riots.<sup>4</sup> The connection between the evolution of Irish identity and public spectacle has been a focal point of American historiography.<sup>5</sup> This essay takes a closer look at reactions to the spectacular crowd events that occurred throughout the strike by examining coverage of the event in the local press, the correspondence between officials employed by the Board of Works, and the depositions recorded during the trial of the eight men arrested for rioting at the worksite.

Historians of the working-class experience in Canada have looked to the Lachine Canal Strike of 1843 as a pioneering clash between labour and capital. The most detailed of these studies was published in 1948 by political economist Clare Pentland. Pentland argued that the strike was a decisive turning point in Canadian labour relations. Working in large numbers at close quarters and under fairly intense surveillance, the men employed at Lachine experienced conditions that bore a close resemblance to the sort of large-scale industrial labour that would become familiar to a growing number of working-class Canadians as the nineteenth century progressed.<sup>6</sup> In setting out the narrative of the strike, Pentland also highlighted January 1843 as a turning point in the management of public works projects in Canada, as it was then that the government ceded the direction of day-to-day operations at Lachine and elsewhere to private contractors like Henry Mason. In an effort to stay within the fiscal confines of his winning bid, Mason slashed the wages of his employees, which was a major factor in their decision to strike.<sup>7</sup> Pentland's interpretation of the strike was echoed in the subsequent work of labour historians Stanley Ryerson and Bryan Palmer.<sup>8</sup> While her focus was on canal projects in Upper Canada, Ruth Bleasdale made an important contribution to this historiography by arguing that the violence that the migrant labourers engaged in was always employed strategically and often helped the workers obtain higher wages and improved working conditions.<sup>9</sup>

The most significant contribution to the literature on canal workers in the last twenty years was Peter Way's *Common Labour*. Rather than studying these strikes as isolated local events, Way pieces together the transnational experience of mid-nineteenth-century canal workers. Labourers migrated from rural areas in Ireland to work on canals up the eastern seaboard of the United States and along the St. Lawrence River and Great Lakes in Canada. These workers, Way contends, must not be lumped in with the skilled artisans who are generally at the core of

national narratives of the working-class experience. Instead, he argues, they must be understood as a large body of displaced migrant labourers who suffered the most visceral and immediate consequences of the transition to capitalism. Economic conditions gave canal workers little alternative to the itinerancy that shaped their lives and fuelled the fierce competition for jobs that frequently turned violent, as was the case at Lachine.<sup>10</sup> In essence, Way argues, the lives of Irish migrant labourers employed on large-public works projects like the Lachine Canal bore a closer resemblance to those of dockworkers and other day labourers who lived on the periphery of cities while seeking physically punishing and sporadic jobs than the artisans who were beginning their struggle to maintain the privileges associated with their status as skilled craftsmen during this same period.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, Way's conceptualization of canal workers as a highly mobile body of itinerant labourers whose experiences must be traced across the Atlantic Ocean and over the American-Canadian border has yet to spark a substantial reworking of this period by historians of labour and ethnicity in Canada, although it would be in keeping with a recent influx of literature that looks to place Canadian history in a broader transnational context.<sup>12</sup> This essay attempts to build on the work of both Bleasdale and Way by using a case study of the Lachine Canal Strike as a means to explore the impact that the arrival of this large group of migrant labourers had on Montreal and the role that public spectacle played in shaping the relationship between the canal workers and other communities in the city.

The historiography relating to the Irish in Canada speaks to the diversity of their experiences.<sup>13</sup> The ethnic and class identities of the canal workers at Lachine were shaped, as Way suggests, by a migration experience that was unique in the way that it created an especially marginalized existence distinct from those who arrived in different circumstances. This marginalization was rooted not only in the poverty and itinerancy associated with their work, but also in the geographic divide between their shantytowns on the periphery of the city and the established Irish communities in cities like Montreal. Furthermore, the bitter internal rivalries sparked by the economic pressures they faced were difficult for outside observers to decipher. Understanding the way that the canal workers were marginalized is essential to understanding Montreal's transition to a capitalist economy.<sup>14</sup>

The expansion of the Lachine Canal was undertaken to increase the capacity, and thus the profitability, of Montreal's harbour. The project was the centrepiece of the colonial government's plans for economic growth established during the governorship of Charles Poulett Thomson. The network of canals being built along the St. Lawrence River was meant to ensure Canada's commercial survival in the face of stiff American competition.<sup>15</sup> The Lachine Canal had been built in the 1820s, but by the early 1840s was in dire need of enlargement and repair. It was used for ships travelling up the river to bypass a stretch of rapids on their way to the harbour at Montreal, and thus providing more efficient access to larger boats was promoted as a necessity by merchants in the city.<sup>16</sup> The working conditions that the migrant labourers encountered in 1843 reflect both continuity and change with the past. As with earlier canal-building projects, the bulk of the work was undertaken with back-breaking manual labour. What changed, though, was the scale and the economics of canal building. By the time that the Lachine Canal was being widened and deepened in 1843, these sorts

## *Solemn Processions and Terrifying Violence*

of public works projects had become an activity driven by risky financial speculation, thereby fostering an environment where contractors like Henry Mason struggled to keep labour costs at an absolute minimum.<sup>17</sup> Mason did so not only by paying lower wages, but also by cutting corners on expenses related to housing and policing. Once work had commenced on the canal, this strategy quickly became a bone of contention between Mason and his employees.

The construction site at the time of the strike was on a stretch of the canal located near the parish of Lachine, a small French-Canadian agricultural village just over twelve kilometres down the St. Lawrence River from the centre of Montreal.<sup>18</sup> This proximity, and the fact that there was an established Irish community in the city, meant that people and information flowed freely between the two locations, and that the strike was conceived of by officials and commentators as an issue that had profound implications for Montreal. This became especially true when canal workers began to engage in public acts on the streets of the city, thus bringing these issues to the doorsteps of Montrealers.

The project was funded with both public and private money, with the bulk of the financing coming in the form of a massive loan from the imperial government in London.<sup>19</sup> This imperial funding had an enormous impact on working conditions on public works projects like this, because it allowed colonial officials to keep construction running, despite a significant downturn in the North American economy. As Irish migrant labourers poured north into Canada, a labour surplus was created that allowed contractors to keep wages at levels well below what workers would need to subsist.<sup>20</sup> Hamilton Killaly, a representative of the Board of Works involved in the construction of the Welland Canal in southern Ontario, wrote to his colleagues during the summer of 1842 that, because of this surplus, "there is no time when [public works projects] can be so economically carried on as at the present."<sup>21</sup>

Like on many of the canals built along the eastern seaboard during the preceding decade, the bulk of the migrant labourers employed at Lachine were immigrants from rural Ireland. As they moved their way along the Atlantic coast in search of work on public works projects, these bands of Irish migrants earned a reputation for alcohol-fuelled violence.<sup>22</sup> Most of this violence did not pit strikers against their employers or local governments, but different factions of the workforce against each other. These schisms among the Irish labourers were evident in the note they nailed to the gate of the construction site, which was meant to intimidate potential strikebreakers more than their employers. In the midst of the strike there were at least four relatively distinct Irish communities in Montreal: a well-established Irish community whose ability to bridge the divide between the city's French Catholic and British Protestant elites was fuelling their material ascendance; a group of more recent arrivals who were more among the city's poorest residents, some of whom sought work on the canal; and two rival groups of canal workers who had been competing against each other for work on similar projects along the eastern seaboard of the United States since the early 1830s. The boundaries between these two groups varied in their permeability and were often negotiated through public acts like parades and riots.

The divide between these two factions was based on regional and kinship connections. The party from Cork, on the southern tip of Ireland,

was the larger and better-armed faction of the labourers at Lachine, with the second party being the families from Connaught, on the west coast. Because these factions were constituted around regional identities in Ireland, many commentators in the Montreal press assumed that they were based on hostilities that stretched back for centuries and were thus entirely at odds with modern practices. Noel Ignatiev, in his study of the Irish immigrant identity in nineteenth-century America, argues instead that these schisms emerged and were fuelled by the fierce competition for work on the public works projects of the eastern seaboard in the 1830s.<sup>23</sup> Rather than being an antiquated practice that survived into the modern era, these feuds were thus an essential component of industrial capitalism. The clashes between the Corkonians and the Connaughtmen that occurred in Montreal and along the banks of the Lachine Canal in 1843 were not part of an ancient feud, but rather a more recently honed strategy to use spectacular public violence to reduce the pool of surplus labour available to contractors. For the men from Cork, this strategy was the only effective means at their disposal for driving up their wages.

The magnitude of the strike must be measured not only by its duration of several months but also by its size. More than 1,100 men participated in the strike. It is not known how many had families with them at Lachine, but contemporary reports suggest that there were a significant number of women and children residing in the shantytown that fanned around the worksite. Coverage of the strike and the violence surrounding it in the Montreal press maintained that the rowdy public demonstrations of the strikers reflected the immigrant community's blatant disregard for public order and the law. While some sympathized with the difficult existence being faced by the canal workers, other commentators suggested that Irish immigrants posed an unacceptable threat.<sup>24</sup> The migrant workers employed on the canal were defined by Montrealers of all stripes as a foreign menace bunched up along the city's physical and social fringe.<sup>25</sup> Powerful stereotypes of a propensity for unruliness in the Irish character pushed some Montreal commentators to dwell on the periodic outbreaks of violence that occurred during the strike. Rowdy and violent demonstrations employed by groups of canal workers to intimidate their foes confirmed the assumptions of elite commentators. Whether these migrants were embraced as a pool of hardworking labourers and fellow members of the Catholic flock, or scorned as lawless, uncivilized brutes who drained the coffers of public charity, it is evident that few saw them as prospective citizens.<sup>26</sup>

When trouble first began to stir at Lachine, the *Gazette* dispatched a special correspondent to provide its readers with credible reporting on the situation. Its reporter, identified only as a "gentleman," left for Lachine on foot at daybreak and reached the worksite just as 150 troops of the 71st Regiment began to clash with the strikers. The *Gazette's* reporter painted an alarming picture of an armed insurrection, noting that the troops had raided a number of nearby lodging houses and uncovered a great quantity of firearms and other weapons. The report contained vivid descriptions of a number of the assaults carried out by the marauding gangs of strikers, detailing the injuries suffered by their victims and how these attacks were committed indiscriminately, with neither children nor women being spared from violence. The key to understanding the events unfolding at Lachine, the correspondent suggested, could be found in the character of the Irish people. The



gentleman was quick to deny reports that the conflict was the result of low wages or a scuffle over the workers' right to smoke on the canal. The violence, he maintained, was rooted in longstanding antagonisms between the Cork and Connaught factions of the workforce that had been further nurtured on the public works of the eastern United States. "It is truly painful to observe these manifestations of hereditary hatred," the reporter chastened, "imported among us from the various provinces of Ireland."<sup>27</sup>

This interpretation of the events was quickly adopted across linguistic lines in the Montreal press as the conventional narrative of the strike, and was often delivered with a strong dose of paternalism and contempt. An editorial in the *Transcript* bemoaned the intra-ethnic strife found on the canal, reasoning that "one would suppose that in a strange land, in the depth of winter, with want staring them in the face, all local jealousies between persons from the rival counties would have been laid aside, but unfortunately for the labourers the reverse has been the case."<sup>28</sup> The Catholic Church's official organ made a similar observation, noting that their presence on a foreign shore ought to be enough to erase petty regional antipathies, and that the failure of the canal workers to overcome these divisions was "triste."<sup>29</sup> *Le Canadien* took this line of reasoning one step further by suggesting that the purpose of sending more troops to police the canal workers of Lachine was not only to quell the violence and ensure speedy completion of the public works projects, but to persuade the Irish to adopt more humane principles by demonstrating the importance of social harmony in Canada.<sup>30</sup> In addition to mapping out a remarkably expansive definition of the military's role in civil society, this statement highlights a crucial thread in the reaction to the strike in the Montreal press. It was constructed upon the assumption that the immigrant labourers employed on these public works projects and their families were not accounted for in even the most culturally inclusive definitions of the Montreal community. Instead, they were understood to be menacing foreigners whose lives were dominated by exotic and uncivilized social customs that travelled with them across the Atlantic Ocean. Unlike other outbreaks of social violence that occurred in Montreal during this period, the riots that marked the strike on the Lachine Canal were not interpreted as a product of Montreal's uneasy ethnic heterogeneity, but as a symptom of the external threat posed by immigration patterns that were dumping masses of menacing outsiders on the city's doorstep. In explaining away the violence as a product of Old World rivalries that could not be shaken on the public works projects of Canada, the *Gazette's* correspondent had freed the contractors building the canal of any responsibility for the unrest at Lachine. More importantly, this interpretation of the conflict would continuously reinforce the marginalized position and outsider status of the Irish canal workers of Lachine and their families. This extensive description of the violence witnessed during the rioting at Lachine was held in check throughout the *Gazette's* report by the assertion that these acts were being carried out by a small group of "ruffianly miscreants" who were holding the surrounding community in the grip of terror.<sup>31</sup> The reporter placed great emphasis on second-hand reports that an unidentified "Yankee" had been spotted in the woods nearby training a group of canal workers to use firearms. The shantytowns of Lachine were portrayed as a community under siege, not from the harsh living and working conditions imposed by the exploitative practices of the contractors building the canal, but

by an ill-disposed faction of that workforce bent on extending the strike until every one of their conditions was met. The correspondent heaped praise on the troops of the 71st Regiment, who, he argued, quickly ascertained who the ringleaders were, placed them in custody, and brought them back to Montreal to await trial. One of the contractors was quoted as saying that with these troublemakers removed, work would recommence shortly on the canal.<sup>32</sup> His optimism would prove to be premature, as the strike lasted through the winter months and the magistrates were unable to gather enough evidence against the men who were arrested to attain a conviction. One of the main reasons that the authorities struggled to establish their grip on the situation was this preoccupation with ringleaders. This was evident in the initial reaction of government officials to the strike. From his office in Kingston, the secretary of the Board of Works wrote to his representative in Montreal, asking him to identify "the ringleaders in causing [the] riots" and "transmit a minute description of them to the office, [so] that the direction of other works may be appraised and such disturbers of the peace prevented from getting employment on any of the works."<sup>33</sup> The notion that the only cause of the riot was a handful of provocateurs was widely disseminated in the press and appears to have had a profound influence on the authorities. Rather than constructively addressing the grievances held by a large group of migrant labourers, they poured their energies into unsuccessful attempts to blacklist and prosecute a handful of the rioters.

First and foremost, the unrest at Lachine was closely linked to the dangers associated with crowds. Few reports on the strike failed to mention the marches, parades, and riots that took place continuously once the strike had broken out. These events served as a reminder of the collective might of, and hence the threat posed by, Irish canal workers. It is evident that this was understood as much by the canal workers themselves as it was by factions of the Montreal elite. Just as correspondents in the press drew on their cultural understanding of the meaning of crowds, the canal workers drew on customs of public protest to communicate both discord and solidarity with each other and with the residents of the city.

Far from being the ancient blood feuds that elite commentators imagined them to be, the forms of resistance carried out by the migrant labourers at Lachine resembled the forms of peasant resistance that Irish historians date to the 1760s.<sup>34</sup> The resistance mounted during the transition to capitalism in rural Ireland during this period was carried out in much the same way that it was along the banks of the Lachine Canal in 1843, by itinerant bands of peasant labourers operating with very little in the way of formal organization. Like the Cork and Connaught factions that clashed at Lachine, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century resistance often employed an element of spectacle, with disguises, decorations, and carefully choreographed processions. Throughout these decades, faction fighting was a familiar part of Ireland's cultural landscape, as rival groups of labourers would brawl at county fairs and other public events.<sup>35</sup> The appearance of these sorts of public acts during the Lachine Canal Strike demonstrates the way that these customs survived the migration across the Atlantic.

When rioting broke out at the end of January and twenty-seven culprits were arrested, witnesses were brought before Montreal magistrates to record what they had heard and witnessed as events unfolded.<sup>36</sup>

## *Solemn Processions and Terrifying Violence*

These depositions provide us with the voices of a varied cross-section of people who experienced the impact of the strike, from labourers to contractors to long-time residents of the parish of Lachine. They do not tell us the whole story: Only one of the striking factions made use of the judicial apparatus, along with local residents and officials associated with the contractor and Board of Public Works. The thread that connected these varied perspectives together was the profound intimidation the canal workers were able to forcefully communicate to their rivals through public spectacles like parades and charivaris, thus demonstrating the preoccupation that local magistrates had with these sorts of public spectacles. Local men reported that they were compelled to send their wives and children to live in Montreal or in the nearby woods in order to remove them from the dangers posed by escalating violence. Men from the Connaught faction described the terror they experienced being on the receiving end of these actions. Meanwhile, those who were associated with the Henry Mason and the Board of Works used their testimonies to appeal for a stronger military presence at the worksite, drawing on popular prejudices about the violence of the Irish character to further drive home their suggestion that Lachine was on the brink of even more catastrophic violence.

The testimony of labourer Jeremiah Higgins, part of the Connaught faction, provided an intimate account of being the target of one of the Corkonian charivaris that occurred shortly after the strike began. Higgins and several other Connaughtmen were gathered in the Blue Bonnet, a Lachine tavern where several related families were lodging near the worksite. Higgins testified that at three o'clock in the afternoon on 4 February a Corkonian named Thomas Gleason, accompanied by a tall red-headed man, walked through the doors of the tavern to "warn us to withdraw from this part of the Country, and to cease to labour at the Canal in default of which they would not only have the life of the deponent but of every Connaughtmen that remained."<sup>37</sup> Armed with muskets, pistols, and a variety of other homemade and rudimentary weapons, the crowd of 200 men assembled outside the front door of the Blue Bonnet lent a great deal of legitimacy to Gleason's threat.

Edward McGreevy's testimony painted a vivid picture of how the Cork faction of the workers employed parades as a means of intimidating their rivals. McGreevy witnessed the parade that occurred on the fourth of February that ended at the Blue Bonnet tavern where Jeremiah Higgins was confronted by Thomas Gleason. In his testimony McGreevy stated that he was in close enough proximity to hear and see everything that transpired. The Corkonians marched in tightly disciplined columns that measured three men deep. McGreevy seconded Higgins's allegation that the men were armed, noting that one of the men who was subsequently taken into custody by the troops, Michael Corcoran, was carrying a scythe and appeared to be acting as the ringleader of the procession. The parade wound its way through the shanties and past the taverns that were known to be occupied by the labourers from the Connaught region and their families. As they passed these residences waving flags and decorated with distinctive badges they uttered warnings that after nine o'clock the following morning anyone from the Connaught faction would be risking his life by remaining in the area: "There were no two ways about it."<sup>38</sup>

While there are no testimonies or depositions that exist to detail the strikers' own motivations for participating in these parades, their

strategy was apparent in the testimonies recorded by other witnesses. First, the parades were clearly designed to stand apart from common brawls and public violence. By parading nightly in carefully orchestrated military formation, bedecked with material symbols of their kinship allegiances, the Cork faction of the strikers successfully expressed their collective might towards their social and economic rivals. Of all the strategies of intimidation and resistance employed by the Cork faction, their use of nocturnal spectacles modelled on both military parades and the charivari was particularly effective. It is important to note that this strategy was not adopted haphazardly. The Cork faction was drawing upon pre-industrial customs of nocturnal protest.<sup>39</sup> When John Rogers, a contractor on the canal, warned a group of strikers that their resistance would be crushed as soon as the troops arrived from Montreal, one of them replied "that the military might watch them by day, but could not do so by night."<sup>40</sup> Their use of public space and spectacle was central to how they voiced their demands for higher wages and intimidated their economic rivals.

It was not only Connaughtmen who felt intimidated by the threat of attack and public violence. Residents of the small parish of Lachine were among the first to plead with magistrates for military intervention as the degree of violence increased sharply at the worksite. Étienne Courville, a Lachine innkeeper, stated that at the time the strike began twenty Irish immigrants were renting lodgings from him. To his knowledge, Courville continued, every single one of these men was armed and participating in the nightly parades through the parish. Courville's testimony painted a picture of a small community under siege from the threat of public violence. He added that his own wife was "maintenant très malade de la peur."<sup>41</sup> The men who remained were subject to violent threats from the strikers, who threatened their lives if they were caught providing information to the authorities. They were clearly struggling to negotiate the intersecting applications of formal and informal law that was occurring in their midst. Furthermore, Courville himself was troubled by the constant talk of violence and murder that was now filling his establishment at all hours of the day and even on Sunday. These threats were often fuelled by bouts of copious drinking among the strikers. According to Courville, the nightly spectacle of the crowds had sent the existing community into a state of terror that only a firm military presence could deliver them from.<sup>42</sup>

In their communications with local magistrates concerning the strike, employees of the contractors and the Board of Works made countless allusions to the dangers inherent in the Irish character. They were, however, careful not to portray themselves as parties with an important stake in the labour conflict. Instead, they cast themselves as mediators in the intra-ethnic clash that had broken out between the groups from Cork and Connaught, and as unbiased witnesses concerned with the well-being of the residents of Lachine. These charges were accepted at face value in the Montreal press, as they were easy to link with existing concerns about the Irish character and the threats posed by large-scale immigration.<sup>43</sup> Joseph Frobisher McDonald, who was employed by the Board of Works as an assistant engineer on the project, testified that he confronted a crowd of 300 Corkonians who had assembled on the Côteau du Pierre overlooking the worksite. McDonald made his way to the spot with the intention of negotiating with the men to lay down their arms, despite repeated warnings from the Connaughtmen that he was

risking his life by doing so.<sup>44</sup> McDonald's narrative of the ensuing clash revolved upon the numerous occasions throughout the day that followed where, at tremendous personal risk, he was able to prevail upon the Corkonians not to resort to further violence. By breaking up fights and negotiating the terms of a temporary truce, McDonald portrayed himself as the embodiment of rational authority holding back the tide of furious violence. While his actions, according to McDonald's own account, did much to hold the violence at bay, he remained adamant that only a strong military intervention would be enough to re-establish order at the canal.<sup>45</sup> The connections being drawn by elites between order and the rational masculinity of elites deserve particular attention. McDonald and others used the deposition process to legitimize their positions of political and cultural authority. This is illustrative of the elite conception of public violence as the antithesis of respectable decorum, which placed a high value on remaining composed in the face of threats to public order. The depositions and press coverage of the unrest at Lachine established a narrative that cast the Irish canal workers as a threat that needed to be closely monitored by the city's elite.

This interpretation fuelled calls for a greater show of civil and military force at Lachine. Donald Duff, a justice of the peace at Lachine, wrote to Alexander Delisle, a clerk of the peace, "Should a conflict take place between so large a crowd of unmanageable persons there is strong reason to apprehend that the inhabitants of this village and vicinity will be greatly exposed both to the loss of life and property, being quite defenseless and unable to protect themselves against so many rioters, some of whom have been walking the street this morning with their arms without the least apparent fear of being reprimanded for their threats."<sup>46</sup> Given the eminent danger the residents of Lachine found themselves in, Duff urged Delisle to begin making plans for police intervention.<sup>47</sup> While allowing that a demand for higher wages and allegations of mistreatment had been the original cause of the strike, lead contractor Henry Mason's testimony also focused on the threat posed by the conflict between the Cork and Connaught factions. Mason also suggested that emissaries from both parties had informed him in strictest confidence that they would be open to compromises on the wage front if it were not for their fear of violent reprisals from their rivals. Mason ended his testimony with the familiar call for a stronger military presence. While his justification for this demand was the protection of the residents of Lachine, a larger demonstration of civil and military force would also have quickly putting an end to the labour dispute on the canal, thus ensuring the quick and relatively tidy completion of the project that he desired.<sup>48</sup>

Newspaper coverage of the events kept the reading public informed of the events unfolding at Lachine, but this might not have been the case with the vast majority of Montrealers. The canal workers did not remain sequestered on the worksite, as many accounts of the strike seem to suggest. Rather, they passed through the city regularly, where they would lobby for assistance and support from Montreal's established Irish community while passing news along to kin who had already settled in the city. Thomas Fallen, a forty-eight-year-old labourer who had immigrated from Ireland to Montreal in 1840, recorded a deposition with Magistrate Henry Corse that provides one example of how word of the impending strike circulated through the city. While employed breaking rocks on the Molson family's estate, Fallen was visited by Bryan

Owens, a fellow Connaughtman working at Lachine. Owens informed him of the escalating violence along the banks of the canal, noting that after several sleepless nights the majority of the Connaughtmen, himself included, had decided to heed the warnings of the Corkonians by fleeing to Montreal. Fallen was not surprised by the news, as he had heard a number of labourers from Cork employed alongside him discussing plans to push the families from Connaught off the Lachine Canal project. Messengers had even been sent from the canal to each of the quarries surrounding Montreal to recruit Corkonians to join their brethren in the shantytowns at Lachine.<sup>49</sup> On the busy and ethnically heterogeneous streets of Montreal, the rigid class and regional identities established on the worksite could be blurred in significant ways. In the weeks that followed the beginning of the strike, the canal workers began to use the anonymity they found in the city to their advantage. This would lead to the deepening engagement of the city's residents with the debates surrounding the strike.

It was on the road that connected Montreal and Lachine that Michael Murray, a labourer returning from visiting friends in the city, came across a group of approximately fifteen Corkonians who were exercising in a field and taking target practice. Patrick Quinlan, whom Murray recognized as one of the ringleaders of the Cork faction, raised his firearm directly at him and threatened his life if "he did not instantly depart."<sup>50</sup> Striking Connaughtmen recorded similar depositions with the magistrates, noting that they were regularly threatened and accosted by small groups of their foes as they passed between Montreal and Lachine.<sup>51</sup> These encounters, described in harrowing detail in court records and in the press, did much to engrain in Montrealers the connections between the canal workers and acts of collective violence. By portraying the strikers as an ill-disposed collective, the judicial apparatus and the majority of the city's newspapers were able to marginalize the grievances being raised by the men attempting to earn their livelihoods on the canal and their families. Few of the depositions reported a specific criminal act. Instead, they were used by an array of actors in order to establish the collective threat posed by the canal workers. They did so by carefully and repeatedly reminding the magistrates of the danger posed by an armed mob, thus helping to keep concerns about unruly crowds at the forefront of the authorities' conception of these events.

For several weeks after work had ceased on the Lachine Canal and hostilities erupted between the rival strikers, the events remained contained on Montreal's geographic and social periphery. The city's press reported regularly from Lachine through the winter months of 1843 but they were, for the most part, buried far beneath the pressing concerns of Governor Charles Bagot's health and politically charged debates over the status of exiled *Patriotes*. The ongoing crisis gradually became more visible to the citizens of nearby Montreal as violence near the worksite escalated. A correspondent summarizing the events of the strike in *Le Canadien* wrote that the nightly parade of Corkonians had caused the bulk of the Connaught faction to flee the Lachine area, and those in the western suburbs of Montreal could see several hundred displaced migrant families lining the road out of town like refugees.<sup>52</sup> Readers of the *Transcript*, a short-lived English-language paper, were warned to avoid travelling along the road linking Montreal and Lachine after sundown, following reports that "marauding villains" had stopped

innocent travellers and subjected them to searches. Not surprisingly, suggestions that the practice of extra-legal justice by gangs of migrant labourers occurring a short distance from the prospective capital of British North America prompted a furious response from the standard-bearers for law and order.<sup>53</sup> The image of the canal workers as bandits along the roads leading out of town or as refugees did much to signify their status in Montreal society as marginalized outsiders with little claim on the rights associated with citizenship.

It was not until early March that residents of Montreal caught a firsthand glimpse of the strike's frenzied violence in their city. A few of the Connaughtmen who had fled Lachine were spotted outside St. Ann's Market in the west end of Montreal by a group of Corkonians who had ventured into the city. A violent brawl ensued, with an estimated two hundred men pouring into the area. While some of these "rascals" were armed with pistols, many more waged their battles with more rudimentary weapons. The police were able to quickly disperse the crowd and arrest the men singled out as ringleaders. Two other men, identified only by their last names as Hoosick and Ryan, were badly hurt in the brawl and taken to the General Hospital, where one later succumbed to his injuries. What was particularly telling in press reports of this riot was that it appears that few, if any, locals ventured into the melee.<sup>54</sup> Whether or not these reports were accurate, they further reinforced the degree to which canal workers remained on the periphery of social life in Montreal, even after many had sought refuge in the city several weeks previously. This incident again highlighted the way that these conflicts were not contained to the surroundings of the Lachine Canal, but were also played out on the streets of Montreal as the labourers passed back and forth between the two.

The positions taken by Montreal commentators towards the public demonstrations of the Irish labourers on the Lachine Canal were not static. Depending on the circumstances being reported and the ideological perspective of the newspaper, sympathy for the plight of the labourers waxed and waned quite significantly. Beneath the surface, however, persistent elite concerns about the collective might of the canal workers were pushing Montreal elites towards a consensus that stretched across ethnic and religious divide that the steady stream of immigrants required to fuel the city's emerging manufacturing economy needed to be more effectively managed and monitored by the state.<sup>55</sup> This consensus must be contextualized in the broader process of state formation, which witnessed the pervasive expansion of the state's spheres of activity and authority throughout this period.<sup>56</sup> In his examination of immigration policies in Quebec, Martin Paquet highlights the measures taken by state officials, beginning in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, to document and screen men and women taking up residence in the province. These efforts were cloaked in the discourse of the period, which increasingly privileged the value of quantitative data and bureaucratic procedure. Along with the growing concerns about public health and epidemic disease that would transform the government's immigration policies during the famine migration of the 1840s, the threat that canal workers had posed to public order and economic growth was held up as further evidence that immigrants arriving in Canada needed to be screened and managed in order to protect public order and prosperity.<sup>57</sup> Acts of physical coercion were also a crucial ingredient to this strategy. The turmoil at Lachine raised

calls for a stronger police and military presence at sites where immigrant labourers lived and worked.<sup>58</sup>

The most virulent opposition to the strikers was found on the pages of the city's French- and English-language commercial newspapers. In *La Minerve*, for example, the canal workers were referred to almost exclusively as "les mutins."<sup>59</sup> Although they reported on the claims that the canal workers made with regards to their poor pay and living conditions, *La Minerve* saw the strike as an unlawful attack on Montreal's commercial prospects, which were tied up with investment in the infrastructure of the port. Rather than offering even tepid sympathy to the migrants, as some other observers did, *La Minerve* reminded readers of the difficult circumstances faced by the contractors, whose terms with the government involved steep penalties for failing to have the canal project completed by the time that the St. Lawrence River became navigable in the spring.<sup>60</sup> *La Minerve's* support for the contractors hardly waned over the course of the strike. The editors and commentators of this organ persistently highlighting the disregard for the law that appeared to be running rampant among the canal workers. The practice of marching and exercising in military formation was construed by nearly every observer as indicating their lawlessness.

While the threat posed by riotous crowds of canal workers on the streets of Montreal prompted a flurry of outrage in the city's press, by early March the same community was beginning to employ crowds and public spectacles of a very different sort to communicate their grievances. In was then that a crowd of several hundred canal workers, assembled in orderly columns, marched in procession from the shantytowns lining the Lachine Canal into the heart of the commercial district. Led by a band of fife players, the procession entered the city along Notre Dame Street before congregating peacefully in front of the imposing head offices of the Bank of Montreal.<sup>61</sup> The procession enjoyed a measure of success on two counts. First, it communicated a very different image of the canal workers to other residents of the city, who had previously been fed a steady diet of violent stereotypes regarding the strikers. Instead of being portrayed as riotous ruffians, they presented themselves as respectable workers and masculine heads of families capable of staking a claim for more humane living and working conditions. Second, representatives of the canal workers were invited into the bank's head offices for a private meeting with Head Cashier Benjamin Holmes, who had recently been elected president of the St. Patrick's Benevolent Society, the mandate of which was to offer charitable assistance to Irish immigrants settling in the city.

The parade managed to win over a number of commentators who had previously dismissed the strikers' demands, at least temporarily. Their accounts emphasized the contrast between the riotous crowds that had ground work to a halt at Lachine, and the musical procession that wound its way through the streets of Montreal one month later. An editorial in *Les Mélanges religieux* turned particularly sympathetic to the canal workers following the procession, going so far as to suggest that conditions on the public works projects had driven these men to "satanic" excess, and that now that order had been established at the worksite they should be invited to take refuge in Montreal. The rhetoric in *La Minerve* failed to scale such lofty heights but did describe the event using considerably more neutral language than the heated words the canal workers normally elicited on their pages.<sup>62</sup>



The fact that the parade did not win universal support from the city's press suggests that the interpretation of crowd events such as this was not entirely predictable. Montreal commentators did not have a singular reaction to the presence of hundreds of canal workers parading through the city, suggesting that public attitudes towards crowd events were in flux in the 1840s. The staunchly Tory *Gazette* did its best to ignore and downplay the event, noting only that reports of five hundred men participating in the procession were greatly exaggerated, and that three hundred would have been a more realistic tally.<sup>63</sup> The *Transcript* drove the number down even lower, informing readers that there had been no more than two hundred and thirty workers in the procession.<sup>64</sup> These subtle attempts to minimize the significance of the canal workers' procession can be read as part of a broader and more concerted effort to marginalize the strikers and their demands.

The marginalization of the canal workers was made all the more evident by the almost complete absence of their own voice in the extensive press coverage of the strike. This silence poses a challenge to any attempt to piece together the motivations for their actions during the strike. While the workers used crowd events like marches and parades to communicate with the residents of Montreal, occasions where their own voices were reflected in the city's newspapers were few and far between. One such rare example can be found in a statement released to the general public at the end of March that was printed in the *Gazette*. Although it was not the most coherent of documents, it did suggest a certain degree of cultural engagement and political aptitude on the part of the workers. The statement lashed out at "contractors [who want] to live by the sweat of our brow," making specific reference to Henry Mason, the contractor on the Lachine project.<sup>65</sup> It affirmed the sense of ethnic solidarity among the canal workers, a trait that had obviously been thrown into question following weeks of intra-ethnic squabbling. Perhaps most cannily of all, it ended with a passionate declaration of loyalty to the Queen and Crown, linking their pledge to remain steadfast supporters of her reign with their vow not to surrender their struggle for better pay and working conditions.<sup>66</sup> This clumsy yet strident declaration of loyalty suggested that, like their sombre procession through the streets of Montreal, this was an attempt by the emigrants to reach out to the broader community. It did little to sway the anti-strike sentiments of the *Gazette*, which may well have printed the piece only as a matter of public curiosity.

This tendency to categorize the canal workers of Lachine as the dangerous outsiders was not static. As the strike dragged on through the winter months of 1843, a number of editorials printed in the Montreal press increasingly held the contractors responsible for the Lachine Canal project up to intense scrutiny. While not excusing the campaign of intimidation that the striking workers had embarked upon, the press reached an uneasy consensus on the fact that the more egregious aspects of the contractor's approach to the labourers bore at least some of the responsibility for the events at Lachine.<sup>67</sup> The practice of paying the canal workers with credit at the store operated by the contractors, rather than in cash, served as a lightning rod for this criticism. Despite assurances that the prices for staples at the store did not vary considerably from the prices for similar goods in Montreal, the practice struck many observers as unfair.<sup>68</sup> This suggests that, as the strike continued, there was a growing sense in certain social circles that the canal

workers ought to be treated according to the most essential definitions of community standards.<sup>69</sup> While these charges were levelled, however, most reports were quick to point out that these were the terms of engagement to which the canal workers had agreed before signing on to work on the canal. Although the need to minimize operating costs might have pushed the contractors to impose harsh working conditions on the public works projects, it was Irish canal workers who remained the embodiment of lawlessness and disorder.<sup>70</sup>

While the reaction to the procession on the pages of Montreal's newspapers was decidedly mixed, it did prompt the city's existing Irish community into becoming more engaged with the plight of the canal workers. Their meeting with Benjamin Holmes in the offices of the Bank of Montreal was the canal workers' first invitation into the bank's headquarters, but it was part of an ongoing courtship. Holmes had been at the helm of a delegation of the city's Irish community who had ventured out to Lachine several weeks earlier. Even those who had railed against the actions of the strikers cast the actions of this delegation in a very positive light. The *Transcript* wrote that these upstanding members of the city's elite might be the only force capable of bringing "the rioters to a sense of their duty."<sup>71</sup> This delegation of respectable Irish community leaders were able to talk the canal workers into agreeing to an uneasy truce. Much credit was given to Benjamin Holmes and his fellow members of the St. Patrick's Benevolent Society, but it was Reverend Phelan, the Catholic priest who served the city's established Irish Catholic community, who received the lion's share of the acclaim.<sup>72</sup> In delivering a mass and homily to a gathering of 2,000 tearful men and their families at Lachine, the charismatic priest succeeded where magistrates and troops had failed. Just as the canal workers themselves had done with their orderly parade through the streets of Montreal, the representatives of the St. Patrick's Benevolent Society employed a different sort of public spectacle in an effort to have their voices heard. At the conclusion of the mass, members of the delegation from Montreal fanned out into the nearby shantytown collecting donations to a subscription fund to assist the families of men who had died or sustained serious injuries since the outbreak of hostilities and asking the men to lay down their weapons. Holmes ended the day by making a generous public donation to the subscription fund and announcing that the donations would be managed and distributed by the St. Patrick's Society.<sup>73</sup> This was, in essence, a crucial moment in identity formation for both the striking canal workers and the city's Irish elite. The canal workers had gained a limited degree of recognition for their grievances from the wider community and put a stop to the escalating violence that had done so much to weaken their campaign. By defusing the tempers at Lachine, the Irish elite had proven themselves capable of doing the heavy lifting that came with the positions of leadership and authority to which they were seeking greater access. Furthermore, they did so in a way that continued to marginalize the majority of the economic demands being made by the canal workers, thereby not challenging the capitalist social vision of the Montreal elite.

Holmes struggled to balance his dual roles as a member of Montreal's rising commercial elite and as a staunch defender of an unruly community of striking emigrant workers. In a letter to the editor published by the *Gazette*, Holmes was careful to point out that he had no intention of interfering in the negotiations concerning the canal workers' terms of

employment. "The establishment of order on the works was their sole object," he wrote, "and this has been secured."<sup>74</sup> There is no reason to doubt the assertion that Holmes and the other members of the St. Patrick's Benevolent Society felt compelled to come to the assistance of the striking canal workers in their moment of need. With that having been said, their words and actions suggest that they were also motivated by their embrace of a bourgeois culture that scorned raucous public spectacles to alter the public aspects of the protests that the canal workers were engaging in. To members of Montreal's Irish elite concerned with their own social and cultural advancement, the danger of becoming associated with a community of disorderly migrant labourers scorned by the other factions of the city's elite would have cast a shadow over their philanthropic endeavours. This was especially true, seeing that the crisis at Lachine coincided with the Irish community's attempts to assert their national identity and respectability through their own brand of public spectacles, such as St. Patrick's Day parades and the ceremonies that surrounded the construction of St. Patrick's Cathedral, a church that was to become the nerve centre of their community and the physical embodiment of its rapid material progress.<sup>75</sup>

The sentiments of the striking canal workers towards these matters can be only speculated upon, for their voices are absent from these records. Their willingness to acquiesce to the wishes of Montreal's Irish elites can be read as the reflection of a genuine wish to curtail the violence of the previous months. These conflicts exacted a heavy toll that must have threatened the authority of community leaders, not to mention the hard emotional punch that death, deprivation, and displacement must have wielded. Many families labouring on the canal might very well have reached a breaking point and simply have had no other option remaining but to pick up their tools and return to work. A more cynical assertion might be that the violence and spectacle of the strike might have reconfigured the labour force in the way that the dominant Cork faction had been seeking in the first place, thereby making the success of the St. Patrick's Society delegation a *fait accompli*.

The strike itself did not reach a tidy conclusion. Although no formal agreement between Mason and his employees appears to have been reached, work had recommenced by the end of March and would continue for much of the next year. Although there were intermittent disputes between the contractor and the canal workers, none of them reached the magnitude of the events that occurred during the winter of 1843. But there were serious riots during the spring and summer of 1843 at Beauharnois and it seems likely that many of the men employed there were involved in the events at Lachine. A series of reports by public officials and merchants with an interest in the Lachine Canal were tabled at the end of March and beginning of April. Among those who weighed in with their opinion on the affair were a number of the city's leading merchants, such as John Molson and Charles Tait, prominent politicians including Mayor Joseph Bourret, Pierre Beaubien, and Augustus Gagy, and public officials like Charles Atherton, the superintendent of engineers for the Board of Works.<sup>76</sup> While the solutions they proposed differed, a consensus emerged that large bodies of itinerant migrant labourers needed to be more carefully managed and contained by their employers and the state, and nearly each one returned to the danger posed by the sorts of public assemblies that had occurred in Montreal and along the banks of the Lachine Canal during the winter

of 1843.<sup>77</sup> There was a great deal of anger from these elites about the weaknesses in the judicial process that had been exposed in the midst of the strike. From the wavering magistrates who had hastily pulled the 71st Regiment from Lachine in the very midst of the rioting there to the court's inability to provide the jury with sufficient evidence to convict the canal workers indicted for rioting, the strike had proven to be "a burlesque on the inefficiency of the authorities."<sup>78</sup> In the aftermath of the strike, Montreal's heterogeneous elite spoke with an increasingly unified voice about the threat posed by immigration, public violence, and unruly crowds. Many of the consequences of the Lachine Canal Strike were quite immediate. The Board of Works and Parliament worked quickly to tighten security around public works projects. The Act for the Preservation of Public Peace banned the possession of firearms in the vicinity of public works projects.<sup>79</sup> In order to guarantee the rapid completion of the Lachine Canal, the Board of Works lobbied successfully to have thirty to fifty troops stationed permanently at the worksite.<sup>80</sup> The men who returned to work on the canal at the end of March would labour under the close supervision of not only a newly appointed contractor and his foremen, but armed troops of the 71st Regiment. These measures came from across the divides that fractured Montreal's elite along ethnic and political lines, as the firearms provision was championed by none other than liberal reformer Lewis Drummond.

It is impossible to trace what happened to the men who struck at Lachine and their families, because we have few of their names and those that we do have are especially common. It is likely that many continued to follow the trail of public works projects across the eastern portion of the continent, which led them in the immediate aftermath of the Lachine strike to the canals being built at Beauharnois and Welland. Others likely settled in Montreal, where they continued to find work on the Lachine Canal and elsewhere in the city. Debates about poor relief often revolved upon the citizenship of migrant labourers. When Board of Works President Hamilton Killaly proposed having the poorest of canal workers use stone from the construction site to make much-needed repairs to the streets of Montreal, Beaubien, who had since become mayor, responded that the city should not provide employment to the canal workers when there were sufficient numbers of Montreal residents who sorely needed the work.<sup>81</sup> During the rioting that occurred during a series of parliamentary and municipal elections in 1844 there was a great deal of public concern, especially in Tory circles, over the participation of canal workers in the electoral process, confirming that these men continued to serve as lightning rods for discussions about citizenship and rights.<sup>82</sup>

The strike on the Lachine Canal demonstrated the central role that public spectacles played in shaping relationships among immigrant workers, their employers, the state, and the broader community. It also revealed the multiple roles that the city played in immigrant lives. For the striking canal workers of Lachine the commercial development of Montreal fuelled the economic arrangements that exploited them in inhumane ways. But the city was also a place where alliances could be forged and where possible alternatives to itinerant employment on public works projects could be found. The streets of Montreal became a theatre for spectacle and a place of refuge. The riots, brawls, and processions that took place around Lachine and Montreal in the winter of 1843 foreshadowed the way that the relationships among immigrants,

their employers, the state, and the urban environment would evolve in the decades that followed. While this article has focused on local responses, the parties involved with the strike were responding to the global pressures that had major social and economic ramifications.<sup>83</sup> The reaction of the authorities to the strike was a major step towards establishing a legal and political regime where immigrants were slotted into low-paying jobs and frequently stripped of their rights as citizens.<sup>84</sup> These events are a reminder of the vital role that public spectacle played in providing immigrants with a voice in this process.

## Notes

1. The note is included with the depositions recorded in front of the Queen's Bench in Montreal related to the rioting that occurred during and following the strike. Joseph Frobisher McDonald, February 1843, SS1, S1, TL19, Depositions to the Court of Queen's Bench (hereafter DCQB), Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec à Montréal.
2. For more on striking canal workers in the United States, see Peter Way, *Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of North American Canals, 1780–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). A number of notable strikes occurred on the canals upriver from Montreal following the events at Lachine. For a summary of the events at Beauharnois, located just up the St. Lawrence River from Montreal, see Raymond Boily, *Les Irlandais et le canal de Lachine* (Montreal: Leméac, 1980). These were followed by a number of serious strikes and riots during the construction of the Welland Canal near St. Catharines, Ontario. See Ruth Bleasdale, "Class Conflict on the Canals of Upper Canada in the 1840s," *Labour / Le Travail* 7 (Spring 1981): 9–39.
3. Susan Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theater in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 5; Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun, 289–339 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 93; Charles Tilly, "Citizenship, Identity and Social History," *International Review of Social History*, Supplement 3 (1996): S7. See also Marc Steinberg, "The great end of all government": Working People's Construction of Citizenship Claims in Early Nineteenth-Century England and the Matter of Class," *International Review of Social History*, Supplement 3 (1996): S19–S50. These notions were shaped by the seminal work of E. P. Thompson, particularly *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).
4. For example, see Kathleen Conzen, David Gerber, Ewa Morawaska, and George Pozetta, "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the USA," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1992): 3–41; Davis, *Parades and Power*; Sallie Marston, "Public Rituals and Community Power: St. Patrick's Day Parades in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1841–1874," *Political Geography Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (July 1989): 255–269; Ryan, *Civic Wars*. In the Canadian context, see Craig Heron and Steve Penfold, *The Workers' Festival: A History of Labour Day in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); H. V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Ian Radforth, *Royal Spectacle: The 1860 Visit of the Prince of Wales to Canada and the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Ronald Rudin, *Founding Fathers: The Celebration of Champlain and Laval in the Streets of Quebec, 1878–1908* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Scott See, *Riots in New Brunswick: Orange Nativism and Social Violence in the 1840s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).
5. For examples, see Tyler Anbiner, *Five Points: The 19th Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Random House, 1991).
6. H. Clare Pentland, "The Lachine Strike of 1843," *Canadian Historical Review* 29, no. 3 (1948): 256.
7. *Ibid.*, 261.
8. Bryan Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 50; Stanley Ryerson, *Unequal Union: Confederation and the Roots of Conflict in the Canadas, 1815–1873* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 182–184. Historian Raymond Boily provides a narrative account of the events of 1843 in a volume that also includes a generous collection of primary documents concerning the strikes at Beauharnois and Lachine. It is the only major French-language account of the Lachine Canal strike.
9. Bleasdale, "Class Conflict," 27.
10. Way, *Common Labour*, 4–7.
11. *Ibid.*, 11. The most notable examination of the culture of these sorts of workers in Montreal is from a slightly later period. See Peter DeLottinville, "Joe Beef of Montreal: Working-Class Culture and the Tavern, 1869–1889," *Labour / Le Travail* 8 and 9 (Fall 1981 / Spring 1982): 9–40.
12. John Douglas Belshaw, *Colonization and Community: The Vancouver Island Coalfield and the Making of the British Columbian Working Class* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002); Phillip Buckner, ed., *Canada and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Phillip Buckner and Douglas Francis, eds., *Canada and the British World: Culture, Migration and Identity* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia University Press, 2008); Lisa Chilton, *Agents of Empire: British Female Migration to Canada and Australia 1860–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Adele Perry, *On The Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849–1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). One exception can be found in the work of economists Mario Seccarecci and Maurice Saint-Germain, who argue that immigration historians need to conceptualize Canada as a region of Britain. See Mario Seccarecci and Maurice Saint-Germain, "Main d'oeuvre immigrante et développement dualiste: l'économie canadienne au milieu du XIXe siècle," *Social History / Histoire Sociale* 34, no. 68 (November 2001): 249–276.
13. Social violence has been the central theme in the historiography of the Irish in Canada. Historians have examined the role that sectarian violence had on policing following the arrival of the famine migrations of the 1840s. See Gregory Kealey, "Orangemen and the Corporation: The Politics of Class in Toronto during the Union of the Canadas," in *Forging a Consensus: Historical Essays on Toronto*, ed. Victor Russell, 41–86 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); Nicholas Rogers, "Serving Toronto the Good: The Development of the City Police Force, 1834–1884," in *Forging a Consensus: Historical Essays on Toronto*, ed. Victor Russell, 116–140 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984). See Michael Cross, "The Shiners War: Social Violence in the Ottawa Valley in the 1830s," *Canadian Historical Review* 54 (1973): 1–26; Cecil Houston and William Smyth, *The Sash Canada Wore: A Historical Geography of the Orange Order in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980). The other major topic in the historiography has been that of assimilation. See Donald Akenson, *The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984); Bruce Elliott, *Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988); Mark McGowan, *The Waning of the Green: Catholics, the Irish and Identity in Toronto, 1887–1992* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999); David Wilson, *The Irish in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1989); Robert Grace, *The Irish in Quebec* (Quebec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1997).
14. Bryan Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression* (New York: Monthly Review, 2000), 5.
15. J. M. S. Careless, *The Union of the Canadas: The Growth of Canadian Institutions, 1841–1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), 16.
16. Upon its completion in 1846, the banks of the canal would become a major manufacturing centre. See Robert Lewis, *Manufacturing Montreal: The*

## Solemn Processions and Terrifying Violence

- Making of an Industrial Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 223–227; Ryerson, *Unequal Union*, 268.
17. Way, *Common Labour*, 207–210, 233–234.
  18. Lachine has been the subject of two recent articles detailing a riot that pitted local residents against British troops during the War of 1812. See Sean Mills, "French Canadians and the Beginning of the War of 1812," *Social History / Histoire Sociale* 38, no. 75 (May 2005): 38–57; Christian Dessureault, "L'émeute de Lachine en 1812: la coordination d'une contestation populaire," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique Française* 62, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 215–252.
  19. For more on this, see Boily, *Les Irlandais*, 18–19; Ian Radforth, "Sydenham and Utilitarian Reform," in *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Canada*, ed. Allan Greer and Ian Radforth (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 77. Historical geographer Jason Gilliland argued that the importance placed on improving the infrastructure along the waterways of Upper and Lower Canada illustrates the way that Montreal's harbour and the Lachine Canal ought to be conceptualized as a space that was intrinsically linked to capitalist development and the expansion of global trade. See Jason Gilliland, "Muddy Shore to Modern Port: Redimensioning the Montreal Waterfront Time-Space," *Canadian Geographer* 48 (2004): 461. Gilliland's spatial argument echoes Way's argument that canal workers experienced the harshest exposure to the most negative aspects of capitalism.
  20. Way, *Common Labour*, 231.
  21. Hamilton Killaly to Charles Bagot, 17 August 1842, vol. 117, reels 6125–6126, Letterbooks of the Chairman of the Board of Works and Commissioners of Public Works, R182-224-X-E, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC).
  22. Way, *Common Labour*, 6.
  23. Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 95. For more on the violent confrontations between Corkonians and Connaughtmen in the 1830s, see Way, *Common Labour*, 200.
  24. In their exploration of collective violence in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Tillys note the way that political elites repeatedly constructed outbreaks of rioting as dangerous and irrational expressions "of the times being out-of-joint." Charles Tilly, Louise Tilly, and Richard Tilly, *The Rebelious Century, 1830–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 2. The propensity of Montreal elites to frame their concerns about large-scale immigration around the danger of collective violence reinforces this argument.
  25. Martin Paquet's recent survey of shifting attitudes towards immigration and inclusion in Quebec history points to a need to study these issues on a micro level. His analysis begins with the observation that immigrants have, since the earliest colonization of New France, been marginalized from the broader community. Under shifting ideological pretences, cultural and political elites have constructed these conditions as the embodiment of a natural social order. Martin Paquet, *Tracer les marges de la cité: étranger, immigrant, et état au Québec, 1627–1981* (Montreal: Boréal, 2005), 18. On a similar note, Sherry Olson argues in her study of ethnic partition in Montreal during the 1840s that the arrival of large numbers of immigrants into the city created a series of interlocking social and ethnic hierarchies that cast the Irish as the "undeserving" or the "other." Sherry Olson, "Research Note: Ethnic Partition of the Work Force in 1840s Montreal," *Labour / Le Travail* 53 (Spring 2004): 167.
  26. See Tilly, "Citizenship, Identity and Social History."
  27. *Montreal Gazette*, 7 February 1843.
  28. *Montreal Transcript*, 7 February 1843.
  29. *Les Mélanges religieux*, 10 February 1843.
  30. *Le Canadien*, 3 April 1843.
  31. *Montreal Gazette*, 7 February 1843.
  32. Ibid.
  33. Thomas Begly to Charles Atherton, 10 February 1843, vol. 117, reels 6125–6126, Letterbooks of the Chairman of the Board of Works and Commissioners of Public Works, R182-224-X-E, LAC.
  34. Kevin Kenny, *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 13. The forms of retributive and extra-legal practices carried out by loosely organized societies of Irish peasants targeted those who were thought to have committed social and economic injustices. While exploitative landlords were often the targeted in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Ireland, it was public works contractors and mine owners who found themselves on the receiving end of these practices in North America. Michael Huggins, *Social Conflict in Pre-Famine Ireland: The Case of County Roscommon* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007), 16–17; Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 92; Kenny, *Making Sense*, 8–9. The influence of E. P. Thompson's concept of the moral economy is evident in this historiography. See in particular E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (February 1971): 79.
  35. Paul Roberts, "Caravats and Shanavests: Whiteboyism and Faction Fighting in East Munster, 1802–1811," in *Irish Peasant: Violence and Unrest, 1780–1914*, ed. Samuel Clark and James Donnelly (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 66.
  36. For more on the actions of the troops during the tumults at Lachine, see Elinor Kyte Senior, *British Regulars in Montreal: An Imperial Garrison, 1832–1854* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1981), 57–60. Senior's analysis of how the troops handled civil disturbances like the Lachine Canal Strike is enlightening. She argues that it occurred in the context of changing attitudes towards the role of the military in civil affairs. Her assertion, however, that the Cork–Connaught rivalry was a sectarian divide appears to be inaccurate, given the fact that both were from heavily Catholic regions of Ireland, and both sides were eager to seek conciliation with a Roman Catholic priest.
  37. Jeremiah Higgins, February 1843, DCQB.
  38. Edward McGreevy, February 1843, DCQB. It was John Rogers, the chief foreman, who noted the flags and banners in his testimony. John Rogers, February 1843, DCQB.
  39. Bryan Palmer's work is particularly revealing with regards to these customs of nocturnal protest. See, in particular, "Blood, Bread, and Blasphemy: Peasant Nights," in *Cultures of Darkness*, 23–47. Palmer's argument that the night belonged to the sorts of ruffians who offended the bourgeois senses of even those who sympathized with them is certainly reflected in the experiences of the striking canal workers of Lachine.
  40. John Rogers, February 1843, DCQB.
  41. Étienne Courville, February 1843, DCQB.
  42. Ibid.
  43. Immigration was a hotly contested political issue in the years surrounding the rebellions and through the 1840s. At the centre of this debate by 1843 was Edward Wakefield, a well-connected politician who had proposed and supported systematic immigration schemes as a progressive measure to deal with poverty in the British Isles. These measures were opposed by French-Canadian politicians who saw them as an attempt to flood Lower Canada with English-speaking immigrants. See D. Fitzpatrick, *Irish Emigration, 1801–1921* (Dublin: Dundalgan, 1984), 14.
  44. Joseph Frobisher McDonald, February 1843, DCQB.
  45. Ibid.
  46. Donald Duff, February 1843, DCQB.
  47. Ibid.
  48. Henry Mason, February 1843, DCQB. In fact, from the moment that these sorts of disruptions had begun to occur on public works projects across the colony, the Board of Works and the private contractors building the canals had forcefully lobbied the government for a strong military presence in the vicinity of these projects, setting a hugely important precedent for military



## Solemn Processions and Terrifying Violence

- policing of labour strife in Canada. An early example can be seen in a letter from Board of Works President Hamilton Killaly to Governor Bagot, which called not only for a strong military presence to be established near the Welland Canal following rioting among the Irish migrant labourers there, but also recommended that William Beverly Robinson, the superintendent of the canal, be immediately appointed a justice of the peace for the Niagara district. Hamilton Killaly to Charles Bagot, 17 August 1842, volume 117, reels 6125–6126, Letterbooks of the Chairman of the Board of Works and Commissioners of Public Works, R182-224-X-E, LAC.
49. Thomas Fallen, February 1843, DCQB; Bryan Owens, February 1843, DCQB.
  50. Michael Murray, February 1843, DCQB.
  51. See, for example, Hugh Logan, February 1843, DCQB.
  52. *Le Canadien*, 6 March 1843.
  53. *Montreal Transcript*, 7 March 1843.
  54. Ibid. Only *Le Canadien* made any mention of involvement by non-canal workers in this particular riot. Tellingly, their coverage suggested that the brawl had been part of an effort to intimidate Montreal residents who intended to testify as witnesses against the strike's ringleaders when the men charged in earlier riots were brought before the courts. *Le Canadien*, 8 March 1843.
  55. Bruce Curtis discusses the state's growing concern with managing the labour pool in *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics and the Census of Canada 1840–1875* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 48.
  56. This definition of state formation is taken from Allan Greer and Ian Radforth. Allan Greer and Ian Radforth, eds., *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 10.
  57. Geoffrey Bilson, *A Darkened House: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); Paquet, *Tracer les marges de la cité*, 116–122.
  58. See Allan Greer, "The Birth of the Police in Canada," in *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Canada*, ed. Allan Greer and Ian Radforth, 17–42 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Kealey, "Orangemen and the Corporation"; Rogers, "Serving Toronto the Good"; Donald Fyson, *Magistrates, Police, and People: Everyday Criminal Justice in Quebec and Lower Canada, 1764–1837* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).
  59. See, for example, *La Minerve*, 2 February 1843.
  60. Ibid.
  61. *La Minerve*, 23 March 1843; *Les Mélanges religieux*, 24 March 1843.
  62. *La Minerve*, 23 March 1843; *Les Mélanges religieux*, 24 March 1843.
  63. *Montreal Gazette*, 25 March 1843.
  64. *Montreal Transcript*, 28 March 1843.
  65. *Montreal Gazette*, 25 March 1843.
  66. Ibid.
  67. *Montreal Gazette*, 20 June 1843; *Les Mélanges religieux*, 24 March 1843.
  68. *Montreal Gazette*, 25 March 1843; *Les Mélanges religieux*, 20 June 1843.
  69. This would be the conclusion that the Board of Works made by the end of March, as their report placed much of the blame for the unrest on the unscrupulous practices of the contractors, who were removed from the project. Thomas Begly to W. Evans, 29 March 1843, vol. 117, reels 6125–6126, Letterbooks of the Chairman of the Board of Works and Commissioners of Public Works, R182-224-X-E, LAC.
  70. *Montreal Gazette*, 25 March 1843; *Les Mélanges religieux*, 20 June 1843; *Montreal Transcript*, 11 March 1843.
  71. *Montreal Transcript*, 7 March 1843; *Le Canadien*, 12 April 1843.
  72. For more on the pre-famine Irish community in Montreal, see Sherry Olson and Patricia Thornton, "The Challenge of the Irish Catholic Community in Nineteenth Century Montreal," *Social History / Histoire Sociale* 35, no. 70 (November 2002): 331–362.
  73. *Montreal Transcript*, 11 March 1843; *Les Mélanges religieux*, 10 March 1843. Holmes's visit was not without controversy. A correspondent for the *Montreal Herald* saw any attempt to negotiate with the Irish workers as foolhardy, suggesting instead that the Irish ought to be forced out of the area and replaced with French-Canadian workers, who had proved themselves in the past to be less combative and willing to work for lower wages. This was met with a stern rebuke in *La Minerve* and from Benjamin Holmes and the St. Patrick's Benevolent Society, which reaffirmed its commitment to providing charitable assistance to Irish emigrants. *La Minerve*, 23 March 1843.
  74. *Montreal Gazette*, 28 March 1843.
  75. For more on the importance of public demonstrations in shaping the respectable identities of Irish elites in nineteenth-century Canada, see Michael Cottrell, "St. Patrick's Day Parades in Nineteenth-Century Toronto: A Study of Immigrant Adjustment and Elite Control," *Social History / Histoire Sociale* 25, no. 49 (May 1992): 57–74; Rosalyn Trigger, "Irish Politics on Parade: The Clergy, National Societies, and St. Patrick's Day Processions in Nineteenth-Century Montreal and Toronto," *Social History / Histoire Sociale* 37, no. 74 (November 2004): 159–199.
  76. Pentland, "The Lachine Strike of 1843," 278.
  77. See *ibid.*, 273–278; vol. 117, reels 6125–6126, Letterbooks of the Chairman of the Board of Works and Commissioners of Public Works, R182-224-X-E, LAC.
  78. *Montreal Transcript*, 11 March 1843. The failure to convict the strikers was the end result of a trial that prompted a controversy of its own, as liberal lawyer Benjamin Hart argued that by detaining the strikers the authorities were violating their habeas corpus rights. This, Hart argued, was an assault on British values. *Montreal Gazette*, 7 March 1843. For more on the difficulties faced by the state in prosecuting rioters, see Donald Fyson, "The Trials and Tribulations of Riot Prosecutions: Collective Violence, State Authority and Criminal Justice in Quebec, 1841–1892," in *Canadian State Trials*, volume 3, *Political Trials and Security Measures, 1840–1914*, ed. Barry Wright and Susan Binnie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
  79. The only opposition to the bill came from Louis Hippolyte Lafontaine, and he did so only on the grounds that the right to bear arms was an important right under British law, and the legislation in question might inadvertently compromise those rights for citizens who happened to live in the vicinity of the public works. Lafontaine appears to have been working under the assumption that the men employed on the public works were not entitled to those rights. Bleasdale, "Class Conflict," 34.
  80. Thomas Begly to Mills, 30 March 1843, volume 117, reels 6125–6126, Letterbooks of the Chairman of the Board of Works and Commissioners of Public Works, R182-224-X-E, LAC.
  81. *La Minerve*, 22 January 1844. Benjamin Holmes once again intervened in the debate, reminding council members of the squalor that the canal workers lived in, noting that many slept in cabins that would make the stables of most council members seem luxurious.
  82. For more on the strike and rioting at Beauharnois, see Boily, *Les Irlandais*. For more on the rioting that occurred during the 1844 election see Senior, *British Regulars in Montreal*, 60–66.
  83. Olson, "Research Note," 166.
  84. For an overview on these issues in late-nineteenth and twentieth-century Canada, see Donald Avery, *Reluctant Host: Canada's Response to Immigrant Workers, 1896–1994* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995).